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CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS.

A. K. ROGERS.

THE term class consciousness is not wholly unambiguous, and I shall need to define the sort of considerations with which I am to be engaged. And I certainly do not mean to raise a question about the right of men to further their own interests, and, when they have ends in common, to recognize this community, and learn to act together to secure what they desire. What I conceive to be the practical meaning of class consciousness is this, but also something more. It is the disposition to find one's common interests in connection with a well-defined and exclusive group of other men, and to allow this special connection to dominate one's whole political outlook and activity.

In modern times, the term brings first to mind the so-called lower or proletarian class, although it is just here that the thing itself has been least in evidence in the past. On the other hand, class consciousness in the upper classes has always been a highly influential fact, which was so little talked about only because it could be so thoroughly taken for granted. It has had its effect less through conscious theory, than through the natural reaction of members of an aristocratic body against such of their number as took sides against their interests and privileges. A gentleman might go to almost any length in the way of mere immorality, and find himself less frowned upon by his associates, including his womankind, by far, than if he were to ally himself effectively with some attempt to blur the distinction between gentleman and common citizen.

It is only with the rise of modern democracy that class consciousness begins to loom up vaguely as a portent. Of the numerous criticisms made upon democracy, most came back in the end to this, that as soon as the majority discovered their power, they would at once rise up and expro-

priate the helpless minority who hitherto had been running things. Now a prophecy, if dated far enough ahead, is always a pretty safe sort of argument; and this particular prophecy is still a favorite at the present day. In its earlier forms, however, it has clearly not worked out as was expected. That votes can be extended practically to everyone, and property still remain reasonably safe from the greed of the poor,—a thing which to many of the earlier critics of America was self-evidently impossible,—has been proved possible by the course of events.

Naturally this does not show that such is going to remain the fact indefinitely. All that it does prove, is that in a modern democracy the populace is not a mob, which spontaneously will flock to plunder as soon as the ballot is put in its hands. There is, as we know, a serious propaganda now on for doing what the critics held that democracy was bound to do; but the fact that it is a propaganda, and not a spontaneous movement, is significant, and is of considerable importance for an estimate of the expediency of the class ideal. It is recognized now that if the relatively expropriated class is really to be united so as to make its class interest predominant, the thing can be done only by a strenuous process of education. Men must be convinced and persuaded, and held against all the natural forces of disruption to a prolonged campaign of collective action. It is clear that this presupposes something quite different from a mob; it is the expression of a voluntary, and relatively rationalized, purpose. And when men have been drilled to common ends sufficiently for this, there is hope of bringing reason to bear upon them. They are capable of stopping to separate means from ends, and asking whether they are really on the road to the attainment of what they want; and when this question can really be put, and reflected upon, the first danger of the situation has passed. Of course if the interests of the majority, and those of a minority, are in point of fact genuinely opposed, there can only be one outcome. The majority will in the end get its way, and it ought to get it. But the assumption of the

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critic always is that the majority is going to work in a manner really prejudicial to its own welfare; and if this is true, it ought not to be impossible to show that it is true. If indeed a certain ideal situation were actually present, there would be serious danger. If the great majority of men were visibly and totally expropriated, so that they had everything to gain and nothing to lose, there might well be possible a ferocious and unreasoning combination to attack all existing institutions; though it might be remarked that in such a case there really would not be much to say in defense of the rational character of the institutions in question. But as a matter of fact this is not of course the real situation. The workingman is far from being without a stake in the country. He does not have much property, but he has some. His job doesn't suit him probably, but still it is a job; and his experience has led him to feel that a job is a good thing to hold on to until he sees pretty clearly ahead in the near future a chance to better himself. Indeed, the workingman with a little money ahead, and a family, is often inclined to be even timidly conservative, and the hopes of the agitator are constantly getting a setback from this, as it seems to him, irrational temper.

The possibility of drawing class lines in political action is always present so long as men do find themselves separated off more or less into groups marked by a conflict of interest. There is indeed a philosophic faith that if we could take an outlook broad enough, we should find everyone's good identical with that of everyone else; and it is no doubt true that there is a very large measure of actual identity between the interests of different people. We are all benefited by the extension and bettering of education, the growth of the arts and sciences, the wider distribution of the amenities of social life, the prevention of useless noise and disorder. Other things being equal, it is to the advantage of everyone that prosperity should reign, and business hum. But a contemplation of these commonplaces, when steadied by a certain degree of satisfaction with one's own lot in the world, has not infrequently carried the enthusiast

too far. He has let his academic vision of the common good blind him to the actual existence of strong antagonisms on the stage where men actually play their parts. Methodists and Baptists and Presbyterians do not now constitute classes in the political sense, in spite of the fact that they represent groups of men bound together by common ends in separation from other men, because, except to the high theological mind, it is not obvious that the Baptist is any the worse off for the prosperity of the Methodist church around the corner; and accordingly we should all object if Baptists were to go into politics as Baptists. We don't expect, in art or philosophy, to see rival schools forming political combinations, because so far are such groups from limiting one another, that they are quite necessary to the highest enjoyment of each. It would be but a drab and solemn world to the philosophical realist, or the cubist, did he rule alone with nothing to do but slay dead dogs over again; to say nothing of the inroads which a cessation of literary and philosophical and artistic quarrels would make upon the gaiety of nations. But if by any chance the good at which all are aiming became a limited good, the situation would alter, and the dictum that the interest of one is the interest of all would need reconsideration.

And this fact, out of which class affiliations grow, suggests also the main point of advantage to be attributed to them. If we are going to make changes to any real purpose, the first requisite is that we should be able to render our issues definite; and definiteness at any rate is secured when we follow the lead of self interest. If we were in possession of the ideal social goal, and all that was needed was to stir up men to its attainment, then private claims might be only a hindrance. But since the goal is hidden, and we are groping our way to it without full vision, it is hard to see how we ever should be able to direct our steps without following the lead of these personally felt demands. Certainly the alternative way of leaving people to discover their neighbors' needs would not seem to carry any better

promise of success. The more strongly a man feels an interest to be his, the more definite is the thing he will go after, and the more decisive, therefore, is the test to which the desire can be subjected. Compare with this the fumbling and inconclusive character of most speculative and academic proposals,—proposals, that is, which attempt to abstract from the interests of anybody in particular, and settle the destiny of mankind on the principles of impartial reason.

It is, however, as I have remarked, sufficiently clear that not all differences between men are relevant to the growth of a class consciousness in the political sense. Indeed I see only two things that appear to have any natural tendency in this direction,—power, and money. And in these latter days, when brute physical force by itself is politically negligible, and special privileges before the law have been approximately done away with, the first of these is pretty sure to reduce itself to the second. Apart from financial inequality, there is very slight ground for fixed opposition between groups. The schools into which intellectuals are divided do not lead to this. Neither do occupational differences in themselves. Doctors do not set themselves against lawyers as such, or shoemakers against tailors; for shoemakers need tailors, and tailors shoemakers, lawyers need physicians, and physicians sometimes need lawyers, or think they do. But the same thing does not hold of the distribution of money rewards. The total amount of the industrial product may be influenced by a great variety of factors; but given the product at any particular moment, it is apparently a matter of arithmetic that interests are not identical. The more for some, the less for others. It is the financial basis, accordingly, on which contending political classes ultimately rest.

And this calls attention, in the first place, to the fact that effective political classes are artificial. They cut across the complex interests of man's life, and isolate one from out this complex, which then is made to legislate for all the rest. Whatever the apparent tactical necessity for a hard and

fast combination here, it seems obvious that it runs the risk of sacrificing other demands. It will hardly happen that a man's best good in every direction will always coincide with his interest in increasing his income; and consequently to make this the fundamental principle for governing his political action is bound to be narrowing and artificial.

There is a second drawback, which will appeal more strongly to a man the wider and more independent his nature. Closely drawn class lines inevitably represent the spirit of militancy; and warfare always carries with it certain undesirable consequences. It necessitates a very large encroachment on personal independence of thought and action. When everything has been subordinated to one end, which end is to be attained by fighting, it is unavoidable that party discipline should be very strict. You must, to begin with, be perfectly and unqualifiedly certain of the worth of your party end, otherwise you do not belong to the party at all, and are not encouraged to stay. Both socialism and militant suffragism recognize the need, for their purposes, of such a final and definitive confession of faith. The result is that dogmatism, and a refusal to examine first principles, become a moral duty; and history does not make it clear that this is the most desirable frame of mind. It is this which has been in the past the particular vice of the religious temper; and it is worth noticing that party socialism, usually a severe critic of religion, is in a special way the movement which has inherited most of that spirit of intolerance which religion is gradually shedding. And besides having to put oneself in a not altogether desirable frame of mind at the start, class warfare makes it necessary further to subordinate the spirit of disagreement as one goes along. A man may have very positive opinions about questions of method; but he must fall in line with the ruling majority, or his company will not long be wanted. It is not difficult to understand why Socialism, again, has shown so great a tendency to split up into sects; the difficulties are very great for the persistence of a militant

minority within a class conscious organization. With a great purpose to attain under militant conditions, men, it is felt, should be willing to give up their private judgment, as actual warfare is generally not thought to be the time for airing differences of opinion. The more class solidarity is put into the foreground, the more this sense of restraint upon individual freedom is bound to assert itself; and it can hardly fail to have unfortunate results. The more energetic natures, unless they are turned into the doubtful paths of the demagog and dictator, will be repelled by the need that they submit themselves to an over-strict restraint; while in the case of others it will mean the exaggeration of mental habits to which mankind is already too prone,—partisanship, unwillingness to consider the other side, and the substitution of action for discussion. And among outsiders, the loss of good will is sure to be considerable. Any group of men with a show of justice on their side are certain of a fairly widespread sympathy beyond their own circle; but the stricter class lines are drawn, the less vigorous is this appeal. Many votes that might have been won for some measure in particular which is approved, will fail to materialize if the insistence is on an entire program or nothing. A class may not care for outside help; but at least it is evident that in proportion to the violence of the appeal to class consciousness, the unlikelihood of getting it will increase.

Now this last point reverts to a matter which needs some further consideration. Allowing that drawbacks exist, it may be said, what else is there left to do if we are to get our rights, except to combine with others who suffer the same deprivation? Of course we *must* combine; but I wish to call attention to the alternative way of combination which the theory of democracy provides.

It has been customary from the start for critics of democracy to assume that the rule of a majority is interchangeable with class rule. So Professor Barrett Wendell, for example, to take a recent instance, argues that majority rule is unjust. What it really means is legislation by a

single class,—the so-called lower class, I suppose,—since wealth, ability, and education will always be in a minority; whereas justice demands that every class alike should have its say. This obviously is using the word “class” very loosely. There is no class, in the political sense, of the average man, the man in moderate circumstances, the educated or uneducated man. That property and special capacity should have weight in determining the affairs of the nation is of course to be admitted; but most people have suspected that they already possess such influence. And as I have already noted, the fear lest majority rule may mean the rule simply of the special class of manual laborers seems more academic than real, unless indeed we call it being ruled by the laboring class to be forced to consider its interests as well as our own. Meanwhile the idea of government through a balance of classes fails of entire clearness. The claim that all classes should be represented has its most obvious historical meaning in terms of a situation where considerable elements of the population are deprived of the franchise. Such men by the very fact of their disfranchisement, though usually for more fundamental reasons also, constitute a class; and the demand that they be represented means no more therefore in the first place than that as individuals they should be allowed to vote. This, however, is quite different from Professor Wendell’s claim, which is intended as a weapon *against* the democratic tendency to enlarge the franchise. Alarmed by the early encroachments of popular power, advocates of the *status quo* sometimes suggested meeting it by “class representation.” Their idea apparently was that the masses would be satisfied if only they had men to represent them in the national council; meanwhile the special interests of the numerical minority were to retain a large enough number of representatives to outvote them. Of course if groups of men, not individuals, are represented, the numerical superiority of a given group might easily be rendered innocuous. This is for example the gist of Sir James Mackintosh’s political theory. It has a specious appearance of justice;

but in reality it is simply the old claim that power ought to reside in the "safe" minority, which has only to be put in plain language to be certain of rejection by modern democracies. Meanwhile the theory of democracy deprecates the whole notion of classes. It holds that a man has the right to *vote*, not to elect a representative. If he wishes to combine with like-minded persons to try to put in some one who shall represent them in some special capacity, he of course has the privilege; but he has to take the chance of being able to secure a majority. What ideally he and his fellows are encouraged to do, however, is not to split up into as many factions as there are separate interests, but rather to sink minor differences by combining on a more comprehensive program, and so endeavoring to enlarge the unity of aim among citizens.

Democracy, then, or the theory of majority rule, expressly discountenances the idea of hard and fast class lines, and encourages instead a fluidity whose aim is to give rational considerations, not selfish interests, a preponderating influence in the long run. This appears clearly, in theory, in connection with the idea of popular *responsibility*. The criticism of majority rule rests very largely on the assumption that it is irresponsible. If the people were a unit, there would be no further question of responsibility; no more ultimate court of appeal exists. But in practice "the people" always means a majority of the people, to whom a minority stands opposed. Representatives can be effectively responsible to the majority which elects them, because in this majority superior force is located. But there can be no responsibility, of the same literal sort, of the majority to the whole people, and therefore no legal responsibility at all, since when it is divided into factions the people as a depository of *force* has no reality. Mathematically the whole people are stronger than any majority. But to exert this power they must be unanimous; and then the situation would be entirely changed, and the supposed majority, as an entity opposed to the whole, would have no existence. But if a majority is not responsible, how is

it ever likely to develop that political morality which is essential to good government?

The dilemma, however, is only an apparent one. Although in a legal sense there can be no authority superior to the will of the majority, in a more indirect way this can still be said to be responsible to the people, and political institutions can be arranged to make this responsibility effective. And the success of this depends on the degree in which the majority is, not a permanent, but a fluctuating thing; so that although, while it remains a majority, it can do its will, it yet is restrained by the knowledge that if it does certain things it will cease to be a majority, and become a minority. This is due to the fact that ideally in a democracy reason and discussion, rather than brute force, is the ultimate court of appeal, and the consequent need for a majority to keep its actions in some degree within the bounds of reason, under penalty of losing its strength. Democracy is not the rule of *the* majority, but of *a* shifting majority. Every instrument of publicity, and every growth in intelligence, is therefore a limit upon the actual, as opposed to the theoretical, power of any party in control. That which constitutes a majority is not a fixed personnel,—this is extremely fluctuating,—but certain purposes and opinions that hold men temporarily together; and the operation of these is under ordinary circumstances so delicate and subject to variation, that only blind prejudice can fail to see that it is suicidal to press the temporary power they give beyond a certain indefinite limit.

Now it seems to me that the advocates of a class conscious proletariat are repeating the illusory identification of majority rule with class rule, and so are overlooking a road to the attainment of their wishes which not only is in principle more rational and equitable, but which also, in view of the plain fact that no well defined and compact class constitutes an actual majority, is a safer path to the righting of injustices. The best chance is offered, pretty clearly, for genuine progress, when the freest possible play of private interest and points of view is combined with circumstances

which insure that these shall meet one another in the first instance on the field of reason and intelligent discussion. A strict class alignment may be, conceivably though not probably, favorable to the former end, but only at the expense of the other; and the only evident way to reconcile the two is by a more serious endeavor to live up to the principle of democracy. Having primarily to convince a number of people sufficient to form a permanent majority, the emphasis would have to be upon those rational considerations which constitute justice, instead of upon a foregone conclusion which does not even pretend to be careful of the supposed interests of other groups. If really the claim of the exploited is a claim of justice, it would seem undesirable not to keep this as much as possible in the foreground. The more the emphasis is placed on the class, the group of men affected, rather than on the nature of the particular right which is claimed, so that their interest appears to stand apart from the interest of others, or the more hostility is directed to the personal make-up of the opposing class instead of to the special privileges they are claiming, in short, in so far as the situation is made to approximate to the irrational standards of a state of war, the more danger there is that its larger rational aspect will be side-tracked, and a pugnacious and intolerant habit of mind developed which is prejudicial to both parties alike. To the complaint of the radical that the way of reason is too long and tedious, and that something more summary is called for, the answer is, that facts do not seem to warrant the confidence that these more summary methods will succeed. Since there appears very little likelihood under present conditions that a secure majority can be obtained for anything that approaches the revolutionary without the aid of members of other classes, to say nothing of the need of other than purely selfish appeals to enlist the full vote even of the class directly concerned, the method of persuasion might seem even from the standpoint of good tactics preferable.

My general conclusion is, therefore, that social progress is best advanced by a political system which encourages

the growth of an intelligent and convinced majority, and then puts them in a position to insure that their conviction shall be honestly and promptly carried out. And in conclusion I may refer very briefly to a proposal which is not indeed intended to promote class differences, but which looks to me very likely to have this effect. The suggestion that we should arrange to give minorities representation in our legislatures seems on the surface a fair one; and indeed it may do all that its advocates claim. But on examination its case does not appear altogether clear. Of course in terms of the party system *the* minority has representation now. If a man's own candidate is not elected, there are other districts in which the relative strength of the parties is reversed; and through this a minority representation is built up which is, or conceivably could be made, roughly correspondent to the number of voters on the two sides. It might be said that a voter's purely local interests are not adequately represented by a legislator from another district. But his local interests, in so far as they are legitimate interests of the community, are in most cases sufficiently taken care of by the local representative of either party; and the notion that legislatures should be the meeting ground of conflicting local interests, bent on making the most advantageous deals, is anyhow of dubious validity. But what the device in question looks toward is apparently something more ambitious. It would have representatives stand, indeed, not for local interests, but for large and more or less principled differences of opinion, as in theory our parties now do; but it would extend the participation of such differences in legislative action, by giving opportunity to an indefinite number of minor points of view.

Now what is the nature of the groups which it is likely would secure minority representation. Probably there would always be a few causes capable of attracting a large following by their sheer eccentricity. Not separated from these perhaps by any very sharp lines, would be one or more large moral issues, of the sort that satisfy the deep-seated human craving to do good to our fellow beings, at

a minimum of personal expense. But the greater number would almost certainly stand for selfish interests, or classes. It is not academic differences of opinion that in the main is going to determine the grouping of voters, but conflicts, real or apparent, in what they conceive to be to their personal advantage. These may be guided by familiar lines of formulated political or economic doctrine of a more or less disinterested and academic sort; but they will hardly be created by these to begin with. Accordingly we are led to inquire how the case stands on the *legislative* side for any scheme which tends to encourage class differences.

The advantages that might be claimed for such a scheme are, as I see it, mainly twofold,—that it would result in the election of an abler type of legislator, and that, with all the main conflicting interests personally represented in legislative halls, we should stand a better chance of getting really adequate laws. Now it is to be premised in the first place that minority interests are anyhow not going to be entirely neglected because they do not have a seat in Congress. A man's salvation, and the salvation of his opinions, ought after all to depend more upon himself than on a representative; and there is still left open the real business of a minority, which is not to force things through the legislature upon an unwilling public, but to grow into a majority by influencing public opinion. Meanwhile suppose that, prior to convincing the country as a whole, a few prohibitionists or single taxers could be assured election. Doubtless they might make good average legislators, and their special outlook might even now and then be of advantage to the cause of sound government; but how would the political situation as a whole be benefited? As a minority, they either would be quite powerless to effect their peculiar aims, or else they would be strong enough to force some sort of a crude compromise as a price for their support in other matters; but until the preliminary work of gaining public backing is accomplished, they could not, and it is not desirable that they should, make any real legislative progress. And the work of public education really belongs elsewhere;

to give a man the opportunity to take up the time of his colleagues by discussing an issue not practically pertinent, at the expense of the real business they are paid to carry out, neither recommends the issue, nor serves any other useful purpose. And the more you multiply the number of the interests to be listened to, the more, it would seem, are you lessening the likelihood of efficient legislation. Especially is this likely to be the case if it is differences of fundamental aim that minority members represent. It at least is an arguable thesis that we have the chance of the best results when legislation depends rather on the deliberation of men chosen to accomplish a relatively specific task set for them by the majority judgment of the nation, than when the legislature is an arena within which the nature of the goal is thrashed out by hired advocates: and so far as this is true, the policy of concentration, with the representatives of the majority in control, is better than a wide scattering of interests. With a strong opposing party responsible for defending the other side of the question, we are apt to get the one main desideratum—full discussion; and we lessen the risk not only of confusing the issue, but of encouraging the unprofitable sort of compromise to which the need of conciliating a large number of conflicting demands is almost sure to lead.

And furthermore it seems rather probable that the more specifically we set out to secure representation of minorities, the more we should be likely to find political opinions hardening into dogmas, and passing from an open-minded insistence on large matters of principle, to a partisan attachment to some pet scheme of method which the representative is chosen to advocate. But a difference of opinion about methods we are already likely to find sufficiently present in existing legislatures, in a more fluid and therefore more desirable form. Besides, the attitude here involves some inconsistency. If the voter is competent to decide about methods, it might seem that he ought to do it directly, and not elect a number of men to fight the thing out all over again; and if he is not com-

petent, neither is he fitted to elect representatives on such an issue.

But now while I think that such considerations as I have been advancing justify themselves in the long run as against the expediency of class conscious propaganda, it would be foolish not to see that there are conditions under which they are bound to be a mere waste of words. Under certain circumstances nothing will prevent the development of a narrow class consciousness. But if, as beings of superior rationality, we deplore this, it is well to determine where the main responsibility lies. The necessary fact is this: whenever any number of men feel that, in a sufficiently important manner, they are being discriminated against, and shut out from privileges which others enjoy, they will inevitably, in proportion to their intelligence and means of co-operation, find themselves developing a special class spirit. But if one is inclined to complain about it, he should direct his complaint to the right party; and the fault lies, not with the militant class itself, but with the other class, frequently the complainant in the case, which by arrogating to itself special privileges precipitates the conflict. Accordingly while one may offer good counsel here—always an easy thing to do,—he need not be surprised, or particularly resentful, if his advice is not taken. He may even feel that there are occasions where the advice tends to be impertinent. There are grievances so great, with the peaceful remedy so apparently remote, that even the philosopher may feel like throwing his judicial temper overboard, and applauding a single-minded and bitter state of revolution. And indeed, since everybody knows that men in authority are by nature slow-moving bodies, that reason and justice do not always seem to them more important than expediency, and that the willingness and ability to make trouble often stands a complainant in good stead as a discourager of apathy, it is not apparent on what grounds one can ever wholly rule out the appeal to factionalism and turbulence as a legitimate weapon. Inevitably, however, with the advance of civilization, the apparent

expediency of this grows less convincing, as temporary conditions become more endurable, the chances for a remedy through peaceful or semi-peaceful means more promising, and, in particular, as the permanent source of remedy more and more plainly lies not in the mere abandonment of special privileges, but in the reconstruction of intricate social and industrial conditions where a failure of reason is sure to injure everybody concerned. One can hardly perhaps subject a feeling of grievance to the niceties of argument; but it does seem that a bitter temper, and the inclination to set one's own ends in antagonism to those of others, lose their justification under such circumstances. The militant revolt of women, for example, in its later stages, seems rather forced and hectic as serious grievances due to a lack of the ballot become more difficult to find, and as the prospect of being able to persuade a not specially unwilling male sex grows by leaps and bounds. Certainly it is arguable that the English suffragists were making headway by keeping their temper, and making their enemies ridiculous; no one except the politicians particularly objected to a warfare carried on in so amusing a fashion. And this is not the least of the drawbacks which the insistence on a strenuous class warfare is likely to entail, that it will interfere with that sense of humor which is among the most powerful of political weapons. The too deadly earnestness of the advocate of a cause is often one of the reasons for his lack of success, as it is indeed a reason why, for the security of the rest of us, he ought not to succeed; a sensitive conscience against extremes, and a recognition that no one cause takes precedence over all other causes put together, is as a means of social advance only second to the necessity of a genuine and firm conviction that this particular cause is nevertheless really important, and worth going after.

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